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ABSTRACT

Presented by the American Foundation for the Blind are background information and a policy statement on consumer participation in the area of services for the blind. Noted is past significant leadership blind persons have manifested in surmounting physical, social, and economic problems. Considered are ways to make known the consumer's point of view, such as participating in the network of community services by serving on the board of an agency for the blind. The policy statement holds that implementation of consumer participation is essential to the field of work for the blind, and that involvement of users in an agency's planning can increase effectiveness in developing, and delivering services. (MC)

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Policy Statement

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BACKGROUND

The history of work for the blind is replete with examples of the pioneering efforts of blind men and women to help themselves and others to rise above the physical, social, and economic problems caused by blindness. We need not talk of consumer participation for this group as much as consumer leadership. However, within defined systems of help which involve the expenditure of either public or private funds, the concept of formal consumer participation has only recently been implemented.

Consumer participation in the area of services for the blind may be viewed in several ways. The consumers of our services are: (1) persons who are blind and, because of blindness, may be unable to cope with factors in their environment; (2) the network of social services in a given community concerned with improving the social standards of its members and committed to high standards of service and to avoidance of duplicating efforts; and (3) the general citizenship of a given community for whom the social agency acts as agent in bringing assistance to those in need. The possible methods of consumer participation are widely diverse but have a common goal in that consumer opinion and suggestion should have an available channel through which its voice reaches administration and the board of an agency, or as a part of it.

In the selection of members for the board of an agency or for specific roles within lay and professional committees which influence the operation of an agency, there is a responsibility to select persons widely representative of their community and capable of giving advice and counsel in relation to the agency's program

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The American Foundation for the Blind is aware that the process of involving users of service within an agency's service design system contains the potential for conflict. Equally, however, it contains the potential for increased effectiveness within service systems of the agency and within the total pattern of the given community.

The American Foundation for the Blind recognizes the right and necessity of blind and/or visually impaired persons to be afforded the opportunity to participate in the planning, development, and delivery of services which the community offers, or should offer to blind people. The Foundation believes that such involvement will do much to protect and nurture the dignity and independence of people who are blind as well as increasing the community agency's responsiveness to the needs of those they serve.

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